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ABSTRACT

Nonverbal displays of status are often employed in argumentative interactions for the purpose of securing an advantage over an opposing speaker. These displays can be conceptualized as "implicit ad hominem fallacies" because, like all ad hominem arguments, they shift the focus of attention away from the substantive issues in dispute to the individuals involved. The fallacy is most evident when nonverbal displays of status are used as a substitute for reason and when they are directed toward an opposing speaker. An attempt is made by the guilty party to belittle nonverbally the physical or intellectual presence of an adversary. For example, in a superior/subordinate interaction at work, the superior may use spatial intrusions, such as moving close, staring, talking loudly, pointing, or touching, to communicate dominance over the subordinate. (A taxonomy is presented for classifying the various types of implicit ad hominems and for considering the significance of these unobtrusive behaviors as a means of avoiding logical argument in face-to-face disputes.) (RL)

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The Implicit Ad Hominem Fallacy:

Nonverbal Displays of Status in Argumentative Discourse

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The study of argumentation in the context of face-to-face interaction has received considerable attention in recent years among argumentation theorists.[1] To date, however, the subject of nonverbal communication in argumentative interaction has not been adequately addressed. This seems to be the case despite the fact that, as Willard points out: "typical arguments rarely if ever take clear propositional form: kinesic, paralinguistic, and proxemic cues may express an actor's position on an issue as often as propositional utterance."[2]

The traditional approach to argumentation as an exercise in public speaking typically views nonverbal communication as a repertoire of behaviors (eye contact, gestures, posture, etc.) that can improve or weaken the "delivery" of a speaker. Indeed, experimental research documents the importance of various nonverbal cues for eliciting gains in listener comprehension,[3] speaker credibility,[4] and attitude change.[5] Moreover, research by Mehrabian identifies a number of implicit behaviors associated with both the perceived and intended persuasiveness of a speaker.[6]

In a much broader context, nonverbal communication plays a prominent role in the encoding and decoding of affective states. Additionally, nonverbal actions express differences in personality, gender, race, age, status, and culture.[7] In face-to-face interactions nonverbal communication not only reveals the interpersonal attitudes which help define the character of a given relationship, but also regulates (in conjunction with certain verbal behaviors) the pacing and patterning of the talk that occurs.

As many argumentation scholars turn their attention to the "interpersonal" context of argumentative discourse, one area of inquiry ought to focus on how an argumentative interaction is affected by implicit forms of communication. Certainly, one would expect variations in gaze, intonation, facial expression, posture, and bodily movement to carry considerable weight in determining the outcome of most informal disputes.[8]

The purpose of this essay is to explicate the way in which nonverbal displays of status often represent a type of ad hominem argument, and, by doing so, to introduce the notion of "implicit" fallacies. First, the concept of fallacious reasoning and the ad hominem argument are discussed with an eye toward understanding their elementary features. Second, a conceptual framework is developed and an appropriate taxonomy is presented to facilitate the study of nonverbal status displays within the genera of ad hominem arguments.

ARGUMENTUM AD HOMINEM

The literature on fallacies customarily regards any erroneous or deceptive method of arguing as essentially fallacious. Whately took the term fallacy to mean, "any deceptive argument or apparent argument, whereby a man is himself convinced--or endeavors to convince others--of something which is not really proved."[9] In his Elements of Logic he considered, "any unsound mode of arguing, which appears to demand our conviction, and to be decisive of the question in hand, when in fairness it is not," as a fallacy.[10] Modern writers have uniformly described fallacious reasoning in similar terms. Error and deception appear to be the

necessary and sufficient conditions for understanding the essence of a fallacy.[11] This seems to be the case regardless of whether the commission of a fallacy is deliberate or accidental.[12]

The standard treatment of fallacies draws a distinction between errors in form and errors in substance.[13] The former include the mistakes in reasoning which lead to invalid deductive patterns while the latter include an array of "other" mistakes and unsound practices. Errors in substance (commonly called "informal" fallacies) have been arbitrarily classified in a variety of ways. Copi offers a somewhat representative taxonomy identifying fallacies of relevance and fallacies of ambiguity.[14] Though most classification schemes include many of the thirteen principal types of fallacy found in Aristotle's Sophistical Refutations, there is no consensus on the more recent assortment. Indeed, it is doubtful that any real consensus is possible. As Joseph observes: "Truth may have its norms, but error is infinite in its aberrations and they cannot be digested in any classification."[15]

The ad hominem fallacy is conspicuously present on most contemporary lists. As one of the "oldest" fallacies on record, this is not too surprising.[16] Locke considered the ad hominem a way, ". . . to press a man with consequences drawn from his own principles or concessions."[17] According to Whately it, ". . . is addressed to the peculiar circumstances, character, avowed opinions, or past conduct of the individual, and therefore has a reference to him only, and does not bear directly and absolutely on the real question . . ."[18] Modern writers generally define the ad hominem fallacy as an attempt to discredit the person

rather than what the person argues. As Demer states: "An ad hominem argument is an argument directed toward the person, even though the character, behavior, or other personal characteristics of that person are, in most cases, irrelevant to the merits of his or her argument or claim."[19]

As an argumentative mode or strategy, it is generally recognized that ad hominems can be faithfully expressed in many ways.[20] Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik suggest, for instance, that:

> There are however, more subtle variations on the same theme. Another way of arguing against the person rather than against his or her claim, is sometimes referred to as "guilt by association." Here, we try to refute a claim by associating the claimant with a discredited group of persons.[21]

Since the sine qûa non of ad hominem arguments is an attempt to degrade one's adversary, any manner of arguing which unfairly shifts the focus of debate from the substantive issues involved to the character of the individuals might legitimately be called an ad hominem fallacy.[22] The guilty party assumes, perhaps, that in making such an argument, questions concerning the credibility of his or her opponent will be raised. As Baird puts it: "The logical assumption in such denunciations is that it is unreasonable for a sound proposition to be identified with an individual whose personality may be condemned."[23]

Since reasoning tends to be viewed as a verbal activity, the formal treatment of fallacies naturally locates "errors" in reasoning by studying the uses of language. A fallacy is committed when language is used in an incorrect or deceptive fashion for the purpose of overturning an

opponent's claim.[24] Thus, the ad hominem argument is conveniently reduced (at least in its most blatant form) to an act of name calling. The problem with such an approach is that it categorically excludes the whole range of nonverbal actions which effectively and unobtrusively belittle one's opponent. In the section that follows the "implicit ad hominem" is introduced as perhaps the most devastating of the ad hominem fallacies which occur in the context of face-to-face interaction.

ARGUMENTUM AD HOMINEM: THE NONVERBAL DIMENSION

Speech is often an inappropriate communication modality. Feelings, for example, are best conveyed through nonverbal channels. The rich emotional content of most facial expressions or pitch variations would be lost if we were compelled to use language as a substitute means of communication. In addition, certain forms of verbal behavior are routinely censored by the social norms of a culture. In many such instances attitudes and feelings find a suitable outlet in nonverbal displays.[25] Explicit ad hominem arguments (i.e. name calling and other unmistakable insults)[26] in face-to-face disputes serve as a case in point. At best, the guilty party might be considered rude (for violating the social etiquette which governs ordinary conversation); at worst, the instigator of a serious altercation. As a result, it seems likely that ad hominem arguments are often expressed in more subtle forms.[27] In this section, the implicit ad hominem argument is introduced as a constellation of nonverbal behaviors which: 1) degrade the source of an argument, and 2) transcend the utterances made by opposing speakers.

Research indicates that nonverbal behaviors communicate some degree of dominance-submissiveness.[28] Mehrabian suggests that a "fearlessness" metaphor enables one to identify the numerous actions associated with either dominance or submissiveness.

> . . . the communication codes seem to be based on a power or fearlessness metaphor. Power coexists with large size (for example strutting versus shuffling; expansive versus small and controlled postures and movements), height (for example standing upright versus bowing).[29]

According to Mehrabian, any repertoire of behaviors which represent power or fearlessness comprise a display of status in a given culture. As members of a culture come to accept certain displays as signs of status, these displays become embedded in the social life of the culture as implicit forms of communication.

In most formal organizations, for example, the nonverbal actions of superiors and subordinates are guided by implicit rules. These rules create asymmetrical relationships by encouraging status differentials between superiors and their subordinates. A superior is supposed to display more status than his or her subordinate. The fearlessness metaphor provides a useful organizing principle for studying the nonverbal behaviors associated with implicit norms. Put simply, fearlessness communicates status. In face-to-face interactions one would expect the higher status person to be more fearless than the lower status person. Such behavior would reflect the dominant-submissive nature of the relationship.

Fearlessness is expressed in various kinesic, proxemic, and chronemic patterns of behavior. Generally, higher status persons are permitted to disregard the physical presence (i.e. gaze aversion, turning away),

territory (i.e. entering office, touching, raising voice); and time (i.e. being late, interrupting) of lower status individuals.[30] Implicit norms lead to various nonverbal displays which symbolize one individual's power to dominate another. In organizational life, superior-subordinate interactions are characterized by communicative acts which show the former to be more fearless (and thus more important) than the latter.

The power metaphor can be applied to all interpersonal encounters where attitudes and feelings are manifested in nonverbal cues. Some degree of dominance-submissiveness is signalled by nonverbal displays of status. In argumentative interactions, such displays are often employed to secure an advantage over one's adversary; to argue, in effect: "Since you are a person of inferior status it doesn't really matter what you say." As in all ad hominem fallacies, an attempt is made to shift the focus of debate away from the substantive issues in dispute to the individuals involved.[31]

The implicit ad hominem fallacy in argumentative discourse is most evident when acts of fearlessness (nonverbal displays of status) are substituted for good arguments and directed toward an opposing speaker. In the highly competitive context of face-to-face disputes, these actions express the conviction that one's adversary is not a serious threat. An attempt is made to belittle the physical and intellectual presence of the opposing speaker by nonverbal means.

The first class of nonverbal behaviors regarded as implicit ad hominems are those which degrade the physical presence of an opponent.

There are four relatively distinct kinds: actions which invade the space of an adversary, actions which symbolically reduce the size of an adversary, actions which signal relaxation, and actions which ignore the physical presence of an adversary. The common denominator is the implicit message: "You are physically weaker than me."

Spatial intrusions constitute one way individuals often belittle the physical presence of others. In an interpersonal disagreement, moving close, staring, talking loud, pointing, or touching, communicate some disrespect for the body of another. Since spatial invasion is anxiety provoking, such behavior suggests a degree of fearlessness when committed during the normally threatening context of an interpersonal dispute. Being stared at or touched during an argument is more likely to signal dominance than affection (though such judgments must be made in the context of other revealing cues).

A speaker can further demean the physical stature of an opponent in an argument by acting in a way that symbolizes the latter's smaller size. Expansive gestures and greater mobility (i.e. walking around) allow a speaker to occupy more space. Standing over another or the more abbreviated displays of height (i.e. raising one's head or brow while looking down) have the effect of "cutting an opponent down to size" symbolically. These "put downs" convey an attitude of disdain toward one's rival in an argument.

Mehrabian's research shows that relaxation is associated with the fearlessness metaphor.[32] Behavioral signs of relaxation (i.e. leaning back, asymmetrical positioning of limbs, absence of tension in hands,

face, speech, etc.) seem particularly fearless in competitive contexts. In athletic events, for example, contestants often try to "make light" of their opponents by concealing signs of tension. Since serious competition would ordinarily produce some anxiety, it follows that one does not view the competition as threatening when there are no observable signs of tension. Thus, relaxation can become a subtle way of showing disrespect for the physical presence of an adversary.

A final way to derogate the physical presence of a speaker is to ignore him or her. Signs of inattention such as gaze aversion or indirect body orientation communicate disinterest. Research indicates the existence of an implicit norm in organizations that allows superiors to be less vigilant than their subordinates.[33] Since inattentive behavior such as turning away represents fearlessness, it is the prerogative of higher status individuals. Consequently, inattention can become a way to display an attitude of superiority over one's opponent in an argument.

Another class of unobtrusive insults includes those actions which belittle the intellectual presence of an opposing speaker. These behaviors appear to fall into two general categories: actions which reject the claims of an adversary, and actions which render assistance to an adversary. In both cases behavior is employed which communicates the message: "You are intellectually weaker than me."

Actions which reject the claims of an adversary do so primarily by means of facial expressions which appear to display some degree of pleasure or displeasure in response to opposing contentions. Laughing or smiling,

for example, shows that competing claims are simply not taken seriously. In competitive contexts such behavior is often used deliberately to express the feeling that there is nothing to fear. Various signs of displeasure (i.e. disgust, frustration, impatience, boredom, indignation, etc.) are typically exaggerated to emphasize disagreement with and disrespect for opposing arguments (the fallacy is underscored when such actions are not accompanied by appeals to reason). Mock displeasure becomes an attempt to show disapproval without discomfort. Genuine signs of displeasure would constitute an admission that one is bothered by the competition. Such an expression, though rejecting an argument, might also communicate respect for one's adversary (this would be inconsistent with displays of pleasure).

The second category of nonverbal behaviors that belittle the intellectual presence of an adversary are those actions which render assistance. To be helped or encouraged by an opponent in any kind of competition is an extreme indignity suggesting a mismatch of considerable proportions. In an argument, invitations to compete are often made nonverbally (open gestures or a raised brow). Certain paralinguistic patterns of behavior seem to mirror the patterns characteristic of parent-child interactions. Speech markedly slower than usual, utterances repeated or accented, exaggerated head nods, extended syllables, or long pauses, all insult an opposing speaker by "treating" him or her like an infant--someone incapable of comprehending normal adult speech.[34] The more nurturing an advocate is, the more condescending he or she appears to be.

Thus, the implicit ad hominem fallacy in face-to-face argumentative discourse is committed when an attempt is made to discredit an opponent by invoking status in lieu of reason. The arguer adopts behavior that degrades the physical and/or intellectual presence of an adversary. The implicit claim contained in such actions is an indictment of the person rather than what the person argues--the sine qûa non of ad hominem arguments.

The most significant feature of implicit ad hominem arguments is the manner in which they transcend the utterances of opposing speakers. Since these behaviors co-occur with speech they allow an arguer to introduce more than one proposition at a time. An attempt is made to reduce the credibility of opposing claims and the source of opposing claims simultaneously. Moreover, the implicit nature of the fallacy and the fact that it can be conveyed through a number of different channels makes it extremely difficult to recognize during an argument and perhaps even more difficult to negotiate. As a result, the use of implicit ad hominems as an argumentative strategy is frequently reinforced.

First, implicit ad hominems allow the user to circumvent the social sanctions against name-calling and other explicit type insults. Second, our emphasis on language makes it less obvious that any sort of fallacy has in fact been committed during a dispute. Thus, the arguer is less accountable. Third, because the implicit ad hominem can be expressed in so many different ways redundancy is minimized. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, since most individuals have not been trained to

critically analyze nonverbal messages, implicit ad hominems are difficult for recipients to manage verbally (this inability could in fact lead to heightened tension and anxiety in a dispute which in turn could escalate the conflict).

CONCLUSION

Since nonverbal displays of status are often used to discredit an adversary in a dispute, the concept of implicit ad hominems seems appropriate and useful. By treating these subtle behaviors as a kind of pseudo-argument in face-to-face disputes we underscore the need to devise effective countermeasures. Like all fallacies, the implicit ad hominem interferes with the process of rational discourse and should be actively discouraged.

Implicit ad hominems probably satisfy an important psychological function in much the same way that other deceptive practices are used in disagreements to save face. In her recent essay on "transcending claims" McCorkle states:

> The transcending claim functions to escape a specific challenge; it does not foster "reasoned" decisions, "transaction," or the processes which are positively valued by those in the communication profession. Rather, persons may collect devices like the transcending claim for use as an arsenal to ward off attempts at legitimate confrontation and still perceive themselves to be "good arguers."[35]

Like the transcending claim, implicit ad hominems may be used as a way of avoiding rather than confronting logical argument.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See, for example, the Spring, 1981 volume of Western Journal of Speech Communication, pp. 111-117.

[2]Charles Willard, "The Epistemic Functions of Argument: Reasoning and Decision-Making from a Constructivist/Interactionist Point of View--Part II," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 15 (Spring, 1979), p. 212.

[3]For a review of research on vocal expression and listening comprehension see M. Knapp, Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), p. 350. See also W. T. Rogers, "The Contribution of Kinesic Illustrators Toward the Comprehension of Verbal Behavior within Utterances," Human Communication Research 5 (Fall, 1978).

[4]W. Barnett Pearce, "The Effect of Vocal Cues on Credibility and Attitude Change," Western Journal of Speech Communication (Summer, 1971) pp. 176-184; John A. Daly, James C. McCroskey, and Virginia P. Richmond, "Relationships between Vocal Activity and Perception of Communicators in Small Group Interaction," Western Journal of Speech Communication (Summer, 1977) pp. 175-187; Ronald E. Bassett, Ann Q. Stanton-Spicer, and Jack L. Whitehead, "Effects of Source Attire on Judgments of Credibility," Central States Speech Journal 30 (Fall, 1979) pp. 282-285; Steven A. Beebe, "Effects of Eye Contact, Posture, and Vocal Inflection upon Credibility and Comprehension," Australian SCAN of Nonverbal Communication (The Communication Institute, Brisbane, 1980) pp. 57-70.

[5]H. McGinley, R. LeFevre, and P. McGinley, "The Influence of a Communicator's Body Position on Opinion Change in Others," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 31 (1974) pp. 686-690; Some researchers have found nonverbal aspects of a presentation to have no significant effect on attitude change. See, for example, D. F. Gundersen and Robert Hopper, "Relationships between Speech Delivery and Speech Effectiveness," Communication Monographs 43 (June, 1976) pp. 158-165.

[6]Albert Mehrabian, "Nonverbal Concomitants of Perceived and Intended Persuasiveness," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 13 (1969) pp. 37-58.

[7]M. LaFrance and C. Mayo, Moving Bodies: Nonverbal Communication in Social Relationships (Monterey, Calif.: Brooks/Cole, 1978).

[8]In fact, it is often necessary to interpret nonverbal cues in order to determine whether two persons are actually agreeing or disagreeing. A "sarcastic" comment, for example, might seem to indicate agreement if the nonverbal messages (tone of voice, facial expression, etc.) were disregarded. Similarly, certain nonverbal cues (smiling for example) often suggest that opposing claims are not intended to be taken seriously.

[9]Richard Whately, Easy Lessons on Reasoning (James Munroe and Co., Boston, Mass., 1845).

[10]Richard Whately, Elements of Logic (Boston: James Munroe and Co., 1848) p. 143.

[11]See, for example, T. Edward Demer, Attacking Faulty Reasoning (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1980); Howard Kahane, Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric: The Use of Reason in Everyday Life (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1980; Irving M. Copi, Introduction to Logic (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968).

[12]Stephen Toulmin, Richard Rieke, and Allan Janik, An Introduction to Reasoning (New York: Macmillan, 1979) p. 158.

[13]Karel Lambert and William Ulrich, The Nature of Argument (New York: Macmillan, 1980) p. 24.

[14]Copi, p. 59.

[15]M. Joseph, Introduction to Logic, p. 569.

[16]An historical survey of the ad hominem fallacy is provided in C. L. Hamblin, Fallacies (London: Methuen and Co., 1970). Hamblin traces the ad hominem back to Aristotle though credit typically goes to John Locke for using the term in his discussion of fallacies.

[17]Locke quoted in Hamblin, p. 159.

[18]Richard Whately, Elements of Logic, p. 235.

[19]Demer, p. 79.

[20]Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik discuss a number of variations, p. 173. A number of writers also distinguish between "abusive" and "circumstantial" ad hominem arguments. See, for example, Copi's discussion, p. 61. Some writers treat the ad hominem as one of a number of "genetic" fallacies--those which attack the source of an argument instead of the argument proper. For instance in Arthur Kruger, Modern Debate: It's Logic and Strategy (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960) p. 195.

[21]Toulmin, Rieke, and Janik, p. 173.

[22]The term "unfairly" is especially important. Most writers maintain that arguments against the person are justified when the character of the person is the issue being debated (i.e. questions concerning the credibility of a witness in a court of law). This position is clearly stated by Copi, p. 63. Some writers take the position that when arguments are made against a person under such circumstances they are simply not ad hominem arguments. See, for example, Daniel McDonald, The Language of Argument (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) p. 116.

[23]A. Craig Baird, Argumentation, Discussion, and Debate (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950), p. 183.

[24]It should be noted that a number of writers have included fallacies in their discussions which are clearly nonverbal in nature. According to Glen E. Mills in Reason in Controversy (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968): "Substitution of nonrational matter or manner for a sensible treatment of a controversial point is a familiar sophism of the diversionary type. Intimidation or appeal to force, ranges from threatening someone's job to international rocket rattling. Lesser bullies, having less power, must content themselves with ridicule, irony, bombast, and anger. They raise their voices instead of reinforcing their arguments." p. 268-9. Arthur Kruger addresses a fallacy labeled "appeal by the confident manner" which involves behaving in an assured fashion. p. 193. Using "bombast" in place of reason is considered a fallacy by some authors. See Austin Freeley, Argumentation and Debate (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1976), p. 152; J. Vernon Jenson, Argumentation: Reasoning in Communication (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1981), p. 182. Jenson's treatment of "nonverbal" fallacies is perhaps the most extensive. He describes bombast as a pseudo argument involving: "a loud voice, vigorous gestures, belligerent manner, air of certainty, and a rapid rate of speech . . ."

[25]Research on "nonverbal leakage" suggests, for instance, that feelings suppressed in one channel leak out through less "controlled" communication channels. See Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, "Nonverbal Leakage and Clues to Deception," Psychiatry, 32 (1969), pp. 88-106.

[26]The use of an explicit-implicit continuum to classify different ad hominem arguments is intended to parallel Mehrabian's use of these terms as an alternative to the popular verbal-nonverbal distinction. See Albert Mehrabian, Nonverbal Communication (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, Inc., 1972), pp. 1-15. Since the unobtrusiveness of the code characterizes "implicit" ad hominems certain obscene and insulting gestures would be regarded as more "explicit" than many insults couched in language.

[27]The notion that insults are often expressed nonverbally is also considered in Desmond Morris, Manwatching: A Field Guide to Human Behavior (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1977), pp. 186-194. Morris identifies the

following: disinterest signals, boredom signals, impatience signals, superiority signals, deformed-compliment signals, mock-discomfort signals, rejection signals, mockery signals, symbolic insults, and dirt signals. Many of these insults, although nonverbal, are too explicit to be included in my taxonomy.

[28]Mehrabian, pp. 16-30.

[29]Albert Mehrabian, Silent Messages: Implicit Communication of Emotions and Attitudes (Belmont, Ca.: Wadsworth, 1981), p. 15.

[30]Martin Remland, "Developing Leadership Skills in Nonverbal Communication: A Situational Perspective," Journal of Business Communication, 18 (Summer, 1981), pp. 17-30.

[31]The idea that some degree of dominance-submissiveness is nonverbally communicated in all interpersonal interactions is particularly important. Nonverbal displays of status are a natural part of an interpersonal dispute and do not necessarily constitute implicit ad hominems whenever present. Contextual factors will determine whether such actions are employed to gain an extra-logical advantage over an opposing speaker.

[32]Mehrabian, Silent Messages, pp. 58-71.

[33]Martin Remland, "Considerate Leadership and Nonverbal Displays of Status: An Interactive Process," a paper presented to the Central States Speech Association, Chicago, April, 1978.

[34]A similar point is made by LaFrance and Mayo, p. 152.

[35]Suzanne, McCorkle, "The Transcending Claim As A Strategy of Pseudo-Argument," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 17 (Summar, 1980), p. 16.